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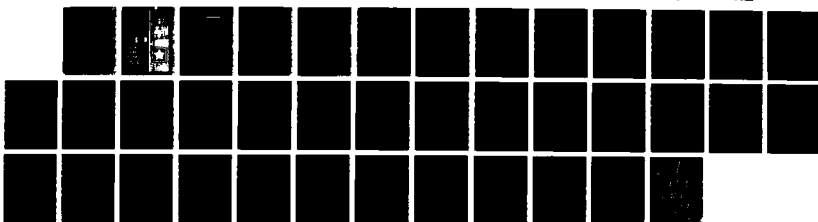
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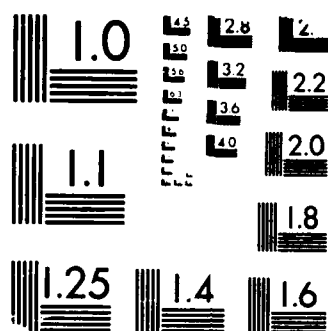
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SOVIET AIRBORNE FORCES AND THE CENTRAL REGION:

Problems and Perceptions

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SOVIET AIRBORNE FORCES AND THE CENTRAL REGION:
Problems and Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

In recent years Western military analysts have presented the view that Soviet planning for theater war is predicated on achieving theater objectives solely through conventional operations (albeit with a substantial nuclear backup).¹ Use of massive amounts of airpower and conventional surface-to-surface missiles in lieu of nuclear strikes will allow them to break into NATO's operational rear with force-tailored, highly mobile formations called "operational maneuver groups" (OMG).² The OMGs would be of division or army/corps size at army and front level respectively. They would conduct raiding actions once in NATO's rear area to disrupt C3 and logistical functions, capture key facilities such as airfields and destroy nuclear weapons facilities and launchers. The goal of this operational concept is to present NATO military and political leaders with a fait-accompli by Day 3 or 4 in which the destruction of nuclear delivery means and the intermixing of Soviet and NATO units in the rear area preclude a NATO nuclear response to the offensive.

All of these writers posit the massive Soviet employment of airborne and air-assault formations to support the advance of combined arms forces generally and in particular the OMG's as they penetrate beyond tactical (50 km) defenses into the operational depths. As the air defense environment in Europe is the densest of anywhere in the world this would seem to pose some



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problem to Soviet leaders tasked with employment of these forces in support of such an offensive. The purpose of this paper is to examine in some detail the capabilities and limitations of Soviet airborne forces in a specific context, that is, in support of a theater offensive. To properly analyze this issue it is necessary to examine current Soviet views on employment of their airborne forces. For the purpose of this paper the term Central Region is used as a subset of the Soviet Western Theater of Strategic Military Action (in Russian, teatr voennogo deistviia hereafter referred to as TVD).

"WILL THEY OR WILL THEY NOT..."

The Soviets resumed analysis of the conventional "option" in the 60's. For example, in a 1967 article entitled "Combat Operations Involving Conventional Means of Destruction" the author states:

" Also noted as a characteristic feature of the formation of troops is the constant presence in the combat formations of attacking tactical airborne troops and reconnaissance-diversionary groups. It is their duty in the course of an attack without nuclear weapons to carry out a great number of missions." ³

The 1976 edition of the Soviet Military Encyclopedia also addresses this specific point:

" During the conduct of military action with conventional means of destruction...forward detachments from each division will destroy security and covering units of the enemy and secure important objectives and regions in the forward defense position. Their action is supported by artillery fire, aviation strikes and tactical airborne assaults." ⁴

At the operational level, this point carries over into more recent writings. The deputy to the Chief of the General Staff Academy in the course of analyzing lessons from the Battle of Moscow which have relevance today during conventional operations states:

" In order to increase the tempo of the offensive and to block the approach of the enemy's reserves toward the breakthrough point it will be necessary to strike with rockets and aviation to the entire depth of his defense, and also to widely employ airborne assaults." ⁵

The current commander of the Airborne Forces (Vozdushno-Desantnye Voiska) Army General D. Sukhorukov continues to see an important role for his troops under modern conditions, especially in view of their historical experience:

"The modern conditions for employment of airborne assaults in offensive operations will differ greatly from the past. However, objective evaluation of the experience of the Great Patriotic War renders to the paratroopers invaluable help in the raising of the combat readiness of the airborne forces to a new, higher qualitative stage." ⁶

It is clear that in Soviet thinking airborne operations will continue to play a key role in a conventional offensive operation.

THE THREATS TO EMPLOYMENT OF AIRBORNE FORCES

Having established that Soviet military theorists still envision airborne forces operating in support of a theater offensive, it is necessary to determine if they perceive the threat to these forces.

In general terms this would appear to be the case. In a 1982 article in Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal (Military Historical

Journal), the author, N. Ramanichev, points out that the threat to airborne employments was recognized very early. Paraphrasing a 1932 article by E. I. Tatarchenko, then chief of airborne forces, the author states;

" (his article) studied in detail the problems of combat security of the assault; pointing out that the reliable screening of the marshalling airfields from enemy airstrikes and the very conduct of the airborne assault itself must be conducted simultaneously with the discovery of enemy aircraft by our reconnaissance aviation, the screening of the assault with fighter aircraft and the camouflage of the loading operations." ⁷

Likewise, the current VDV commander states that airborne forces should only be used to decide those missions that can't be accomplished by any other means.⁸ The use of the word "only" is the only difference between his statement and the mission statement in the 1940 Field Regulations; it does however indicate a healthy respect for the threat.

The threat to airborne operations manifests itself in three ways: the air defense threat, the air threat, and the ground threat once the force is landed. Army General Margelov reflected his concern in a 1977 article while still commanding the VDV

" Under modern conditions they (the airborne forces) will fall under the threat of attack even in the course of assembling at the departure airfields. The air movement of forces has become much more complex since air defense systems can seriously oppose the flight of military transport aircraft. Immediately after landing, the troops must be prepared to repel increasingly powerful attacks, most of all those by tanks, air strikes and combat helicopters." ⁹

Specifically addressing the air defense threat, Margelov stated " The experience of the war...showed that without air superiority, effective suppression of anti-aircraft artillery

along the route of the military transport aircraft, and the covering of the air echelons, the successful employment of large airborne operations is impossible." ¹⁰ In 1981 Sukhorukov echoed this concern, writing that "Experience showed that the successful employment of large airborne assaults is impossible without complete superiority in the air, along the flight route, the landing area and the area of subsequent combat operations." ¹¹

The Soviets consider the air and air defense threat as closely related; that is, the destruction of the enemy's air defense is an essential precondition for gaining air superiority.

The recognition of the air/air defense threat is clearly influenced by Soviet analysis of World War II. Sukhorukov clearly states that the success of the Allied airborne operation in Normandy was due to their having "complete air superiority." ¹² Soviet analysis of the near disastrous airborne operation during the Battle of Moscow also holds an important present day message because " Security of the combat formation of the transport aircraft by fighters and the suppression of air defense means along the flight route and in the region of the airborne assault is one of the required factors for a successful operation." ¹³

Tanks and combat helicopters pose the most serious ground threats to airborne forces. Soviet writers stress the need for rapid assembly after the drop in order to oppose the expected attack. They also point out that technological advances have made the airborne force more survivable once on the ground. With the introduction of the BMD armed with a 73 mm gun and anti-tank

guided missiles, it appears that the Soviets are satisfied with their ability to deal with the ground threat to the force.¹⁴

Soviet military writings clearly recognize the threats to airborne operations. The most significant of these are the air and air defense threat to the force while located in the departure airfields and while enroute to the objective area. It is interesting to note that the VDV personalities are most vocal in insisting on total air superiority. It also appears that these personalities presently are satisfied with the ability of the force to defend itself once landed.

LIMITATIONS TO EMPLOYMENT OF AIRBORNE FORCES

The extent of employment of airborne forces in a theater war is dependant upon the capabilities and limitations of the means required for effective employment. Any assessment of this problem is inherently difficult due to Soviet reluctance to present hard data on the subject. Instead, one must determine Soviet perceptions of the limitations to employment. One way to do that is to look at what they say about their own and Western historical experience and from that process draw general conclusions about their perceptions.

VTA ASSETS

The principal and most obvious limitation to employment of airborne forces is the number of Voenno-Transportnaia Aviatsia (Military Transport Aviation or VTA) aircraft available to

transport the airborne force. Traditional analysis tends to merely add up the personnel and tonnage of an airborne division and divide that into the best estimate of total VTA (and sometimes Aeroflot) holdings to determine Soviet capabilities. This was especially popular when the VDV was first recognized as a potent power projection force in the 70's. In the context of a theater level conflict, this process is misleading and meaningless. Some "bean counting" is inherently necessary but analysis of the competition for VTA assets is more significant.

The VTA presently has over 1200 aircraft in its inventory,. Of these, the ones most applicable to operational level airborne operations are the AN-12 Cub, the IL-76 Candid and the AN-22 Cock. Their characteristics are outlined in Table 1. Characteristics of the C-130 and C-141B are included for comparison.

TABLE 1
AIRCRAFT CHARACTERISTICS ¹⁵

	AN-12	C-130	IL-76	C-141B	AN-22
Year introduced	1959	1952	1974	1976	1967
max payload(kg)	20000	19685	40000	32025	80000
cruising speed(km/hr)	670	602	750-800	910	740
range with max payload (km)	1400	1850	4600	3950	4200
landing run (m)	500	518	450	1128	800
#paratroopers	60	64	125	125	175
# BMD's	2		3		4
est # in 1985	270	534	270	254	55

The IL-76 is the most important aircraft. It is being produced at the rate of 30 per year while AN-12 and AN-22 production has stopped.¹⁶ The An-22 would more likely be employed as a cargo hauler rather than as a lift aircraft for airborne operations. Although a demonstration drop was conducted from a single AN-22 during the Dvina exercise in 1970 it appears that is the exception rather than the rule (as are similar operations with our C-5A).¹⁷

Aeroflot aircraft are not considered in the total number of available aircraft due to the particular pilot skills required for air drop or assault landing operations. One must assume that

aircraft used for airborne assault operations in a theater level conflict would come from trained VTA assets.

It is difficult to determine how many aircraft would be needed to deploy elements of a Soviet airborne unit. A great deal depends on the size and tailoring of the force, the logistical requirements of the force and the amount of time the force would be expected to operate. In short, it is mission dependent. John Hines, a Soviet specialist in the Office of Net Assessments, OSD, estimates that it would take 55-65 IL-76 aircraft to drop a Soviet airborne regiment equipped with BMD's.¹⁸ This would equate to over 200 AN-12 sorties. Obviously this would be a sizeable percentage of the total AN-12 and IL-76 assets now available. Coupled with this is the fact that the AN-12 suffers from a distinct range limitation when compared to the IL-76. Depending on where the units deploy from, this could make the IL-76 assets even more valuable. This problem will be dealt with in more detail later.

OPERATIONAL COMPETITION

The total number of VTA transport aircraft is but one important aspect in Soviet employment of airborne forces in the Central Region. Another important factor is competing operational requirements for those same assets.

Operational competition can take various forms. For example, to obtain the surprise necessary for success of the OMG's (ie by striking prior to complete NATO deployment), some Western

analysts propose that the Soviets will launch an offensive from a "standing start." This would entail attacking with the forward deployed units in GSFG and in the Central Group of Forces in Czechoslovakia. Once the offensive is launched, rapid Soviet reinforcement is available only from Poland (2 tank divisions) and from the Western military districts in the Soviet Union itself (33 additional divisions, mostly category II and III).¹⁹ Depending on the situation, the Soviet Supreme High Command may deem rapid reinforcement of the Western Theater essential. It is likely that VTA assets would be used if such a need was urgent enough (or NATO air succeeds in significantly disrupting rail traffic). This could conceivably limit the availability of VTA assets for airborne employment in the Central Region.

Soviet military and political goals could operate as a second competing factor. In the context of a short-war philosophy, the Soviets may decide to employ their available airborne forces for strategic or operational-strategic missions rather than merely operational missions in support of the theater offensive. The 1986 edition of the Voenno-entsiklopedicheskii slovar' (Military Encyclopedic Dictionary) defines an operational-strategic desant (assault) as one that is intended to "...seize large administrative-political centers and industrial regions of the enemy and disorganize the enemy government..." They can also be employed to "...open a new front of military action and sometimes to cause the withdrawal of particular governments from a war..."²⁰

One possible objective of such a desant could be Norway. John Erickson, writing in Strategic Survey in 1976 points out that we make a mistake in thinking of Norway as merely a "flank" of the Central Front and that in the event the Soviets decide to go for Norway, the assault will inevitably involve airborne forces, notably those in the Leningrad and Baltic military districts.²¹ Any such employment would obviously draw VTA assets away from employment in support of the theater offensive in the Central Region.

Another more far-fetched (and dangerous) target for an operational-strategic desant could be the French and British missiles targeted at the Soviet Union. Since the Revolution in Military Affairs, destruction of the enemy's nuclear assets has remained one of the most important missions for airborne forces, especially at the operational-strategic level. Virtually all of their exercises include destruction of nuclear assets as a mission for the airborne forces. The possibility of such an operational-strategic mission is presented by Viktor Suvorov in his book Inside the Soviet Army. Such missions are shown on a map without any accompanying textual comment.²² Suvorov does specifically address the point however in reply to criticism by C.J. Dick in International Defense Review:

" The main task of the Soviet VDV (airborne forces) and Spetsnaz (special forces) will be to neutralize the other side's nuclear weapons [in the south of France]...the south of France will be the main target of the VDV and Spetsnaz...Second in importance as targets of the VDV and Spetsnaz attack are the nuclear submarine bases in the area of which Soviet paratroopers are likely to appear." ²³

Once again, such a mission would involve virtually all of the IL-76 assets due to the range involved. This would preclude a large employment of airborne forces in the Central Region.

Therefore it is clear that allocation of finite VTA assets for the employment of airborne forces on the Central Front will come only as a result of some hard decision making. To further reinforce this point it is interesting to note that Soviet analysis of the Manchurian campaign of 1945 pointed out that only 30% of the all transport aircraft sorties were allocated to airborne operations.²⁴ Although that percentage should not be held sacrosanct for planning purposes, it does show the degree of demand for what may be a scarce commodity in a theater level conflict. The Soviet answer to the problem is continuing production of IL-76's at a rate of three per month. In addition they are moving ahead with the production of a super cargo aircraft, the An 124. This aircraft will have a payload capacity almost four times that of the IL-76.²⁵ The ongoing introduction of the 120 mm howitzer mortar and other self-propelled weapons into the airborne force structure has had the effect of increasing firepower while decreasing the required lift due to the elimination of many prime movers. This trend toward "self-propelled mobility" coupled with the growing lift of the VTA means that by the 1990's transport aircraft will constitute far less of a limiting factor for airborne force employment.

COMBAT AVIATION SUPPORT OF THE OPERATION

As noted earlier, successful airborne force employment is contingent on total air superiority. Security for the operation would entail three separate functions for Soviet combat aircraft and air defense systems: first, security in the marshalling area; next, security enroute to the objective; and finally, ground support of the inserted force. Aviation support of the airborne operation is an essential element of the airborne operation itself. In a discussion of the use of aviation during the Battle of Moscow, this point has been applied to present day operations:

" Before the drop (landing) of the assault it is necessary to conduct an uninterrupted air preparation with the goal of destroying the firing means, equipment and forces of the enemy. Security of the combat formation of the transport aircraft by fighters and the suppression of air defense means along the flight route and in the region of the airborne assault is one of the required factors for a successful operation. Upon completion of the insertion, aviation support and security for the desant is of paramount importance since the enemy, located on its own territory has a number of advantages in concentrating forces and freedom of maneuver." ²⁶

The Soviets do recognize the vulnerability of an airborne force throughout the operation. How do they plan to secure such an operation with their present assets?

At first glance it would seem the problem is somewhat academic. The quantitative balance of combat aircraft in the Central Region lies clearly in the Soviet's favor (3775 Pact vs. 2368 NATO).²⁷ In the event of an offensive in the Central Region however, many of those aircraft would be required to perform a variety of missions formerly assigned to nuclear weapons. These would include striking C3I facilities, nuclear deliver means,

airfields and air defense sites as well as fighting the air superiority battle. Having said that, what is the Soviet assessment of the effect competing missions would have on the availability of aircraft to secure the airborne operation? Some clues exist.

In the work Desantniki (Paratroopers) the author analyzed World War II airborne operations and pointed out the massive air support for the Allied airborne operation across the Rhine in 1945. He stated 8500 combat aircraft were committed to support the two-division operation; this is a ratio of 2:1 combat aircraft to transport aircraft. He then went on to state that such a large number of aircraft were available because "...other targets and missions for them did not exist." The point is that " Under modern conditions such a large number of combat aircraft would hardly be necessary to secure the landing and combat actions of airborne assaults." ²⁸

Similarly, in analyzing the Manchurian campaign, the author states that 5400 combat sorties were flown in support of the 20 airlanding operations conducted. The airborne operation itself required 7650 transport sorties. This ratio is roughly 2:3 combat sorties to transport sorties. The author also makes it clear that such a large number of combat aircraft was unnecessary due to the almost total inactivity of the Japanese air force.²⁹ One should also remember that the Manchurian airborne operations assaulted widely separated targets in relatively small groups. A

more concentrated airborne operation would obviously require less security.

A final point to consider is how "total" is total air superiority in Soviet thinking? Again, history provides us with the answer.

" The experience of the air superiority battle during the Battle of Moscow shows that through massive employment and diligent utilization of aviation it is possible to gain air superiority on several operational or strategic directions, even under such conditions as when the enemy has overall strategic air superiority." ³⁰

Thus, it appears that the Soviets do not perceive insurmountable limitations to their ability to secure airborne operations. The pre-emptive nature of present conventional air operations would seem to provide the necessary security for such operations. In addition, a growing number of multi-mission aircraft affords some flexibility in allocation of assets to airborne missions. Overall, this factor seems to be the least constraining one in the employment of airborne forces in the Central Region.

ASSAULT FORCE AVAILABILITY

The availability of VDV forces for potential employment in the Central Region is the third limiting factor for consideration. Again, at first glance it appears that the Soviets have an ample number of airborne troops to employ. These forces, numbering some 50,000 personnel, are organized into eight divisions. Their deployment and possible orientations is shown in Table 2. ³¹

The geographical orientation of the divisions must not be taken too literally. VDV forces are a reserve of the Supreme High Command and could be committed to TVD's and fronts as needed. For example, the 76th Guards division was employed during the Dvina exercise in the Byelorussian Military district.

TABLE 2
AIRBORNE FORCE DEPLOYMENT

<u>Military District</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Division</u>	<u>Orientation</u>
Leningrad	Pskov	76th Gd	NW TVD
Baltic	Kaunus	7th Gd	W TVD
Byelorussian	Vitebsk	103rd Gd(a)	W TVD
Odessa	Kishenev	98th Gd	SW TVD
Moscow	Tula	106th Gd	Cen. Reserve
Turkestan	Fergana	105th Gd(b)	S TVD
Transcaucasus	Kirovabad	104th Gd(a)	S TVD
Baltic	Jonava	44th Gd	Tng Div(3-
NOTES: a. 1 Regt in Afghanistan			5000pers
b. In Afghanistan			

A more recent example is that one regiment each of the 103rd Guards division of the Belorussian Military District and the 104th Guards of the Turkistan Military District are presently reinforcing the 105th Guards operating with the 40th Army in Afghanistan.

Looking at Table 2 one sees that there are 3 and 2/3 division equivalents available for possible employment in the Western TVD. The 44th Guards at Jonava is generally regarded as a training division and should be discounted for immediate combat availability. In addition, the 106th Guards would probably be retained by the Supreme High Command as a reserve. That leaves 1 2/3 division equivalents to consider for operational employment in the Western TVD. This approximates the Soviet statement that one or two airborne divisions would support a TVD for a strategic offensive.³²

It is interesting to consider the ranges involved in employing these two divisions in the Central Region. Without forward basing, the 7th Guards at Kaunas lies approximately 1000 km from potential objectives in Northern Germany. This is well within the 5000 km range of the IL-76 and would allow the transport aircraft to recover in the Soviet Union following the operation. However, if lifted by AN-12's, the aircraft would have to recover in Eastern Europe for refueling prior to being utilized for subsequent lifts or other missions. The 103rd Guards in Vitebsk would require IL-76's to lift them the 1400 km to potential objectives in Southern Germany. Keeping in mind the number of available VTA aircraft discussed earlier, it is apparent that Soviet planners face significant time and space problems.

The Soviets are aware of these problems. For example, in 1980 during the exercise Brotherhood in Arms, conducted in the

German Democratic Republic, the Soviets airdropped an airborne regiment on the western side of the Elbe River.³³ What made this operation significant is that this regiment was transported from a military district in the Western Soviet Union by Il-76's. This reflects the Soviet interest in solving the "time-space" problem of employing airborne forces directly from their bases in the Soviet Union into the Central Region.

It appears then, that upwards of two divisions would be available to support a theater offensive in the Central Region. It is also clear that without forward basing substantial obstacles would have to be overcome to ensure timely employment of those forces.

IMPLEMENTATION OF POSSIBLE SOVIET SOLUTIONS

The above factors represent the key limitations to employment of airborne forces in support of a theater offensive. The Soviets recognize these limitations and analyze their historical experience to help find solutions. Drawing on Soviet perceptions some conclusions can be reached concerning the present characteristics of Soviet airborne operations and what such operations might look like in the Central Region in support of a theater offensive.

SURPRISE

Since the death of Stalin, surprise has reemerged as an important principle of war in Soviet military theory. In the

context of a strategic offensive it is an essential element to achieve victory while preventing the use of NATO's nuclear assets. In his discussion of the OMG as an operational concept, Christopher Donnelly writes:

" If NATO is given a long period for preparation and deployment then the western forces will be so strong and well entrenched that a quick Soviet victory is unlikely, and at best the war is likely to end in tactical nuclear stalemate. Therefore a certain, even a high, degree of surprise is essential to Soviet success." ³⁴

Other analysts agree with this premise. John Maurer of the Foreign Policy Research Institute states:

" Recent discussions in the Soviet military literature suggest that Soviet planners are giving close attention to the problems and prospects of initiating combat operations before or during the process of general mobilization. The object of this strategy would be to ensure surprise in the offensive and through the mechanism of surprise, to defeat the alliance before it was able to establish a blocking defense, or to authorize the release of nuclear weapons." ³⁵

This important precondition is also addressed in the Defense Intelligence Agency Publication, The Soviet Conventional Offensive in Europe:

"Seizing the strategic initiative at the outset of hostilities by attacking before NATO forces are fully deployed offers the Soviets the best opportunity to avoid the dangers inherent in massing for a breakthrough of a prepared NATO defense." ³⁶

Likewise, subordinate operations will also have to rely to a great deal on the achievement of surprise to guarantee success.

The Soviets recognize this:

" It is clear that the operations of airborne troops, diversionary-reconnaissance groups, and advance detachments will produce the greatest success only when they are used suddenly." ³⁷

To achieve a measure of surprise, various techniques can be used. First, the airborne operations must be launched in a sudden strike using only one aircraft pass. This stands in Soviet literature as a major lesson of World War II. Another way is to drop simultaneously in several areas. This has the effect of confusing the enemy and shortening the amount of time the force is vulnerable enroute to the objective area.³⁸

Another possibility is to conduct the operation under cover of darkness or bad weather. Soviet writings indicate that their aircraft have navigational equipment on board that would allow such operations (similar to the US AWAD system: All-Weather Aerial Delivery System).³⁹ Such technology allows airborne operations to be conducted without having to visually identify flight check points or even the drop zone itself. During the Berezina exercise in 1978 for example, US military observers witnessed the drop of a Soviet airborne regiment from IL-76's during a snow storm.⁴⁰

Deception measures also play a key role in achieving surprise. These could include moving troops and VTA assets forward under the guise of an exercise, marshalling at dispersed airfields at night or even integrating airborne elements into the semi-annual troop rotation to GSFG for forward basing.

These are some of the methods the Soviets might use to achieve surprise for the airborne operations. It must be recalled that these would fall under a general deception plan designed to achieve the maximum level of surprise for the entire offensive.

THE AIR AND ANTIAIR OPERATION

To provide greater security for the operation the Soviets will integrate the airborne operation into the larger air operation. In a conventional offensive the air operation will replace nuclear strikes at the outset of the offensive. The objective of the air operation is to destroy NATO nuclear capable aircraft on the ground, to strike C3I, nuclear resources and to secure an air corridor into NATO's depths.⁴¹ The antiair operation is conducted to gain and maintain air superiority. Identification of the air corridors and the means to establish and secure them would take place at the TVD level.⁴² This would simplify integration of the airborne assault landings (also being planned at the TVD level) into the overall operation. In addition to air strikes, artillery and conventionally armed missiles would also be used to establish the corridors.

Once the corridors are established they could be used by both combat and transport aircraft simultaneously. In fact, multi-mission capable aircraft could secure the transport aircraft enroute and then strike selected targets in the landing areas. Additionally, even when total surprise is not achieved, NATO aircraft would more likely be deeply involved in the air superiority battle than in trying to specifically interdict the airborne echelons.

The success of the strategic offensive depends almost totally on the achievement of air superiority. The employment of OMGs without such superiority would be counterproductive and could

result in the failure of the entire offensive. This point also encourages the integration of airborne operations into the air operation from the outset.

THE AIR ASSAULT UNITS 43

The creation of front level air assault brigades and army air assault battalions is a partial solution to the problem of force availability. It also minimizes potential command and control problems by giving the front and army commanders an organic airborne capability to employ in direct support of his OMG's. In addition, within GSFG there are five assault helicopter regiments (one per army) and two front helicopter regiments (one assault and one transport) to move these units.

The appearance of air assault units is a manifestation of a conscious decision to "divide the labor" required of airborne forces into operational and operational-tactical missions. The air assault units would fill the need for a force operating in direct support of a division or army sized OMG at the operational (army and front) level. They would be employed by the front commander to insure rapid movement of the OMG into the enemy's operational depth. Since most of the air assault brigades' objectives would lie within range of forward deployed rotary wing aircraft, the force would be able to utilize low-level or terrain-following flight techniques which would significantly enhance the survivability of the force.

Additionally the air assault force has the capacity of being "reloaded" after linkup with the forward detachment of the OMG. Logistics support for the helicopters could be included in the overall OMG logistics package allowing repeated use of air assault units in direct support. ⁴⁴ Airborne forces using fixed wing transport on the other hand would have to be withdrawn to secure airfields for further employment.

The airborne divisions themselves would carry out operational (or operational-strategic) missions at the behest of the TVD commander or Supreme High-Commander. Assignment to the front commander would probably be the exception rather than the rule.

FORCE SURVIVABILITY

Assuming that the Soviets decide to employ operational airborne forces, what then would such an operation look like? How would the force be organized and what tactics would be employed?

The figure shows graphically how the Soviets perceive such an operation. ⁴⁵

In the last decade the Soviets have tended to concentrate on smaller sized airborne operations. At the most, they have been regimental in size. More often, however, they involve employment of a battalion reinforced with ASU-85 assault guns, artillery and/or anti-aircraft systems. In fact the last division sized operation was conducted during the "Yug" exercise in 1971. By 1980 the move toward reduced scale operations was complete.

Exercise Brotherhood in Arms was described by Graham Turbiville as one that

"... points to a trend that has been observed in the size of airborne exercises: that airborne exercises, all carried out in the context of theater war scenarios, have become smaller. While this may be a function of the smaller size of field training exercises generally, of specific exercise scenarios and of economic considerations, it does point to a change in airborne capabilities, and perhaps to a recognition of the dangers faced by fleets of very large transport aircraft from the latest generations of NATO's air defense weapons." ⁴⁶

This tendency reflects Sukhorukov's earlier statement about conducting simultaneous drops to confuse the enemy as to the location of the main effort.

In the course of describing NATO airborne operations a Soviet author states that a division sized airborne assault would encompass an 80 by 100 km area which would have in it some 10-12 drop zones and 4-6 landing zones.⁴⁷ This would correspond to one drop or landing zone for each battalion.

Virtually all Western analysts agree that in the event of a strategic offensive special operations forces (voiska spetsial'nogo naznacheniia, commonly known as "Spetsnaz") would play a key role. They would conduct sabotage, assassination and raids to aid in disrupting NATO's rear area.⁴⁸ Another important role for such forces would be to assist the airborne operation.

" Detachments of spetsnaz can assist in the selection, designation and strengthening of the drop (landing) zones." ⁴⁹

To support that premise, Suvorov asserts that many of the spetsnaz elements would already be in-country prior to the outbreak of hostilities.⁵⁰ Use of spetsnaz for "terminal

guidance" on drop zones would also allow the smaller drops described above. By securing drop zones prior to the operation, they would also preclude the need for the airborne force to commit an "assault detachment" to perform the same operation. This in turn enhances the security and surprise of the operation.

The equipping of all VDV regiments with the BMD also encourages smaller drops and enhances surprise. In the Soviet view, the introduction of the BMD radically changed the nature of airborne operations. The BMD allows airborne battalions to drop away from their objectives thereby increasing security and survivability. If a major objective is to be attacked (for example, an airfield) the battalions can drop separately and assemble as a regiment some distance away, or even attack simultaneously from different directions. The BMD provides substantial anti-tank defense, maneuverability and some armor protection. It addresses precisely those weaknesses the Soviets perceived in their historical airborne experience.⁵¹

The transport aircraft themselves would be organized into echelons to enhance security. Each echelon would consist of approximately 20 aircraft.⁵² This number of aircraft would be enough to carry an airborne battalion. These echelons would be separated by 3-4 minutes in trail and by a minimum of 25 km in width.⁵³ Command and control elements would be cross-loaded to ensure redundancy in case of aircraft loss.

In the area of the drop itself, the aircraft would cross the drop zone in a "V of V's" formation and drop the heavy equipment

first. As noted earlier, there would be only one pass. The BMD crews may jump with their vehicles to speed up recovery and assembly. The troop carrying aircraft would drop utilizing both doors and the ramp.⁵⁴ This ensures a quick exit of the aircraft and thus causes a tighter dispersion pattern on the ground.

The combination of all these features is designed to ensure the greatest security, speed and surprise in the operation.

Once on the ground and assembled, the airborne force will utilize "raiding" tactics to accomplish their missions. The Military Encyclopedic Dictionary defines a raid as:

" The swift movement and combat action of highly mobile units (airborne, tank and mechanized) in the enemy's rear with the purpose of destroying enemy personnel and equipment, the disruption of logistics functions, command posts and communications.." ⁵⁵

The primacy of this form of combat is reflected in an analysis of raiding actions conducted by airborne forces in the course of the Battle of Moscow:

" Under modern conditions the possibilities of employing raiding operations greatly increased. Parachute-assault forces became more mobile and their fire and striking power increased." ⁵⁶

The BMD provides the force with a measure of security through maneuver. The force can strike their immediate mission objective and then move on to a subsequent mission. The subsequent mission can be designated or merely be a " target of opportunity " within the battalion (regimental) zone. During exercises, raiding actions have covered as much as 60-80 km in a single night.⁵⁷ The BMD has a cruising range of 320 km ⁵⁸ and could operate at

similar ranges for two to three days. Such tactics increase the disruptive potential of the airborne force and concurrently its security by making it more difficult to "find, fix and destroy."

The Soviets do not consider supply of the force to be a major problem. The force would probably take enough fuel and ammunition to operate for 2 or 3 days. In addition, like the OMG itself, the airborne force would be expected to live off the land to a certain degree.⁵⁹ The anticipated speed of the attacking forces would probably not require the airborne force to operate much longer than three days before linkup.⁶⁰

ECONOMY OF VTA ASSETS

First, the timing of the operation can be an effective way to economize aircraft. If the airborne operations go in as an integral part of the air operation itself, those VTA assets can recover early enough in the offensive to be used for other missions.

Second, assuming that the air corridors have been effectively established, TVD, front and army VTA assets consisting of AN-26's and helicopters can be used as necessary for resupply or "housekeeping" missions. This again would free up the critical long range VTA assets for other missions.

A third way for VTA assets to be conserved is by targeting airfields or large landing areas for airborne assaults. This is considered an important mission for airborne forces and is practiced regularly.⁶¹ In addition, both the AN-12 and IL-76

have a short take-off and landing capacity and can operate from unimproved strips.⁶² This would facilitate use of "bare-base" airlanding sites in the assault. Since fewer aircraft are required for airlanding operations than for parachute assault operations, some economy of assets could result. Following the initial parachute assault by a portion of the force, the remainder of the force and its equipment could be airlanded. This also aids assembly and organization of the force for its combat mission.

Finally, although Aeroflot should not be considered for utilization in the airborne assault, they can fulfill many of the other demands on VTA aircraft. About 200 AN-12's and IL-76's are on duty with Aeroflot.⁶³ They could be used to move material and personnel from the Western Soviet Union forward into Eastern Europe. This again would release VTA aircraft and crews for combat missions.

If a combination of these measures along with some forward positioning are used, it is possible that enough VTA aircraft could be made available to support a timed two-division airborne operation in support of the theater offensive.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the 1930's airborne forces have occupied a key role in Soviet military theory. The continuing evolution of Soviet operational art reflects the theories of the 30's and the experiences of the Great Patriotic War; it is not surprising that

the Soviets still consider airborne operations an essential element of the larger theater operation. Continuing technological development of airlift and airborne-specific equipment reflects the key interest Soviet leaders have in these forces and their application. Their writings indicate an appreciation of the threat to and limitations of such a force on the modern battlefield. They also show a willingness and ability to examine the problems and develop the equipment and theory necessary to overcome them. Moreover, in the event of a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict, employment of airborne forces will be an integral part of the theater offensive. The appearance of mechanized airborne forces in the NATO rear on Day 1 of such an offensive will not be decisive in itself. However, the confusion and damage these forces would generate would contribute significantly to the success of the greater overall threat: the division and army sized OMG's committed as part of the theater offensive.

ENDNOTES

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6. D. Sukhorukov, "Vozdushnie desanti vo frontovikh nastupatel'nikh operatsiyakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voini" (Airborne Assaults in Frontal Offensive Operations of the Great Patriotic War) VIZh, No. 12 (1985), p. 21.
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12. Sukhorukov, "Vivodi iz opita primeneniia vozdushnikov desantov vo vtoroi mirovoi voine," p. 69.
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28. Ivan I. Lisov, Desantniki (Paratroopers) (Moskva: Voenizdat, 1968), p. 253.

29. Bryukhovskii, "Osobennosti primeneniia aviatsii v Manchzhurskoi operatsii," pp. 22-23.

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47. I.I. Andrukhov, Vozdushno-desantnie voiska NATO, (The Airborne Forces of NATO) (Moskva: Voenizdat, 1970), p. 164
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